

Gina, mon cœur

Dor Guez

Dvir Gallery | Paris
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Dor Guez's solo exhibition at Dvir Gallery Paris is derived from archival materials of private and public sources from France and North Africa. Guez was born in Jerusalem to a Christian-Palestinian family on his mother's side and a family of Jewish immigrants from North Africa on his father's. His practice raises questions about the role of contemporary art in narrating unwritten histories and recontextualizing visual and written documents.

"Gina, mon cœur" reflects the first line of each love letter Guez's grandfather, Felix Guez, penned to his future wife, Gina Assous, during the 1930s. Almost a century later, the artist discovered nine letters the couple exchanged from his late grandmother's estate. The handwritten notes became the source for this new work – drawn between continents, cultures, and languages. The exhibition includes a photographic series, archival objects, maps and prints that reveal mythological and political dimensions of Tunisia, homeland of Guez's father, as a site of colonial projections and strategies.

Felix, a theater playwright in Tunisia, wrote the passionate letters in French. His writings reveal a forbidden love story – woven in secrecy unbeknownst to Gina's parents, who opposed the union. The letters shed light on their courtship period and on a web of languages the two mastered. Felix's mother tongue, Tunisian-Arabic, is transformed in the letters into French in a North African dialect and allows a glimpse into the historical fabric in which the two were educated and lived.

Une valise

A large-scale photograph of a mid-century suitcase unfolded with the name of Gina's maiden name, "Assous", written in light blue. Gina kept one of her family's suitcases from the 1950s, when they immigrated from Tunis to Marseille, then to Nicosia, concluding at Haifa's port. Guez photographs the six outer flaps of the suitcase, made of crocodile skin, then connects the six images into two-dimensional surfaces that resonate with the image of a hunted animal's skin spread on the floor.

Histoire du Consulat et de l'Empire

As part of a series of nine prints based on French atlases from 1886, Guez connects different territories that comprised the French empire. He models various areas from the maps, manipulates them from square to circular shapes and extracts all human markers. Devoid of the human markings and text, the origin of the maps cannot be specified – rendering them «dysfunctional» in terms of orientation. Then, Guez creates an overlay between the several manipulated rounded maps and assembles them through their water channels and rivers into a lace-like image.

La Pointe de l'Europe

The work is based on an archival map from 1886 of the crossing

point between Europe and Africa – the Straits of Gibraltar. Guez's manipulated image is printed on a silver photographic paper and undergoes processing that restores it to the material from which the image was printed originally – copper plate.

Sciences and Humanities

The new series of photographs is based on a 1960s guide on flora in the region published under the Sciences and Humanities department. Guez focuses on plants growing on national border regions in the Levant to consider the appropriation of nature to enforce a sense of national identity: "Features of the land are often renamed with titles related to specific national ethos. Plants often bear names of cities, countries, and peoples, framing them as 'Syrian', 'Damascene', 'Jordanian', 'Egyptian', 'Persian', 'Land of Israel', 'Arab', 'Palestinian', 'Jewish', and more" (Dor Guez). To create these layered photographs, the artist places one botanic illustration at a time on top of a paper-made lightbox. The result is that the front image appears in sharp focus while the image printed on the underside of the paper is cast in faint detail. Sciences and Humanities, therefore, attempts to blend two different plants, two images that are nearby and share a physical border. Each print is placed in a cotton box whose color matches the climatic area where the plant grows, referring to the regional map at the end of the original botanical guide. For example, Syrian Poppy is cataloged in reference to the northern area of the map (light orange) and placed in a matching-colored cotton box. Ostensibly, the project could contain hundreds of boxes in four different colors.

Samira, a young Palestinian woman, is a first-year psychology student at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Her colloquial Hebrew, sartorial choices and mannerisms render her indistinguishable from her Jewish Israeli contemporaries. Guez, her cousin, asks her to recount a recent experience: in the restaurant where she works as a waitress, her Arabic name evoked racist responses, causing her boss to ask her to change her name to the more Jewish-sounding "Sima"; they finally settle on Mira. As she recalls the incident and repeats it at Guez's prodding, she begins to articulate the complexity of her struggle with prejudice, gender bias and misogyny.